

## **Japan House**

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On Tuesday, June 3, 1997, the University of Illinois-Urbana-Champaign broke ground for the Japan House. Hidden by a berm and the trees of the university's arboretum, the Japan House resembles an authentic Japanese teahouse. Indeed, it is an important resource for offering various elements of Japanese culture such as art and the tea ceremony to both its students and the community. The Japan House and its staff accomplish this by teaching classes, holding open houses for the public, and creating an authentic Japanese space for its activities.

The university's first contact with Japanese culture came in 1900, when the first Japanese student arrived. During the first half of the twentieth century, Japanese studies took a back seat to the study of Western civilization. Opportunities to formally study Japanese art and culture at the University of Illinois grew significantly with the arrival in the School of Art and Design of Kabuki Theater expert, Shozo Sato in 1964. Sato constructed an authentic Japanese space to teach Japanese culture; the first Japan House was in a Victorian styled house on campus.

Sato often demonstrated the tea ceremony in the Japan House to anyone who would come. The tea ceremony was an important part of the culture that is ritualized and peaceful. The Japanese tea ceremony involves serving, accepting and drinking green tea and Japanese cookies in a peaceful and ritualistic manner. The ceremony is based on principles of Zen Buddhism: cleanliness, respect, harmony, and tranquility.

Sato also brought his passion, Kabuki, to the first Japan House and other campus venues. Kabuki is a Japanese theater tradition characterized by extravagant make up, costumes, and intense, rapid actions.

The architecture of the new 3120-square foot Japan House is essential to the programs that the Japan House provides. Form follows function in rooms dedicated to the tea ceremony. The Japan House holds three tearooms, each of which has a stage and enough space to fit about three dozen people. The tea rooms have woven mat floors essential to the tea ceremony because the participants kneel on the floor.

The price of the Japan House was about \$650,000 and was paid for exclusively through donors. Although some of the donors had an understanding of Japanese culture, they did not directly provide input into its design. Allen Marx, the lead architect working on the Japan House for the architectural firm, Isaksen Glerum, researched Japanese homes for examples of Japanese architecture. It took about 18 months to finalize the Japan House's design and one year to build. Traditional Japanese architecture is characterized by the simplified design evident in the sliding panel doors that lead to the garden, walls and doors free of ornate designs and carvings, and the use of natural wood tones.

Both the Japan House and its surrounding garden create the illusion that the environment has changed from Illinois to sixteenth-century Japan. The architectural style used for the Japan House is that of traditional Japan which goes back centuries before Western cultures influenced it. Creating a very traditional building has its difficulties in modern times. Marx had to balance traditional architectural styles such as mats and steps with wheelchair accessibility. Other deviations from traditional Japanese architecture

like air conditioning were easier to conceal as they are hidden behind walls and the ceiling. The Japan House is located on Lincoln Avenue and encompasses part of the 120-acre University of Illinois Arboretum. The surrounding lake and Zen style rock garden add a sense of tranquility. Conifers surround the outside walls, separating the Japan House from the outside world. The combination of architecture and landscaping reflects the peaceful aspects of Japanese culture.

The director of the Japan House is currently Professor Kimiko Gunji. She is involved with the daily operations of the Japan House and specifically the Cultural Enrichment Group, a community group which discusses various facets of Japanese culture in order to gain a better understanding of the culture. Gunji also teaches academic classes at the university in the College of Fine and Applied Arts: Japanese Tea Ceremony and Zen Aesthetics, Japanese Aesthetics through the Art of Japanese Flower Arrangement, and Rigidity and Flexibility in Japanese Art and Culture.

The Japan House teaches Japanese culture to children in the community on Children's Day through storytelling, origami, and other samples of Japanese culture. The Japan House has played host to Japanese artists such as woodblock print artist Isao Takahashi, musicians such as lute player Yoko Hiraoka, and diplomats like the Consul General of Japan. In 2001, the Japan House co-sponsored the "1000 Cranes" project in response to the tragedies of 9-11. Very recently, the Japan House sponsored the National Puppet Theater of Japan which performed two *Bunraku* plays for a full house at the Krannert Center for the Performing Arts in Urbana. [From "Information," *Japan House*. University of Illinois Urbana Champaign.

<<http://www.art.uiuc.edu/galleries/japanhouse/information/index.cfm>> (Aug. 27, 2007);

Melissa Merli, "'A Totally Different Environment' - UI's Japan House Teaching Facility Aims to Increase Tolerance through Cultural Understanding." *The News-Gazette* [Champaign-Urbana, Ill.] 28 Sept. 2006, sec. e3: T-12-13. *Access World News*. NewsBank. University of Illinois Urbana Champaign. <<http://infoweb.newsbank.com/>>. (Aug. 27, 2007); \_\_\_\_\_, "Skills, Beauty on Display in Bunraku Style of Puppetry." *The News-Gazette* e3 10 (Oct. 4, 2007); Student historian's e-mail interview with Allen Marx (Sept. 6, 2007); and Julie Wurth, "UI Breaks Ground for New Japan House." *The News-Gazette* [Champaign-Urbana, Ill.] *Access World News*. NewsBank. University of Illinois Urbana Champaign. <<http://infoweb.newsbank.com/>> (Sept. 5, 2007).]